

A UNITED FRONT AGAINST HATE

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MUHAMMAD CHAUDHRY, center, president of the Islamic Center of the East Bay, tells marchers that bad often pollutes good, referring to a recent arson of his mosque.

Marchers seek to make Antioch free of religious strife

By Tom Lochner
STAFF WRITER

ANTIOCH — With religious strife rampant all over the world, one Contra Costa city made a move Sunday that whatever pits community against community elsewhere, it must not and will not happen here.

A "March Against Hate" from

Antioch City Hall to Antioch High School by Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sikhs, Baha'i, Zoroastrians and other believers was a denunciation of the torching of a mosque in Antioch last month. It also was a call to look past differences of doctrine to focus on ethics that are common to most of the world's religions.

It was not a simple call for tolerance, organizers said.

"It's moving beyond tolerance to active respect — to stand together as a community," said Father Tim Bonacci of St. Ignatius Catholic Church in Antioch. He also sits on the board of the Interfaith Council of Contra Costa County, which organized the

event Sunday.

The Aug. 12 mosque fire that destroyed the mosque of the Islamic Center of the East Bay on 18th Street was the latest in a string of attacks. Three times this year, the mosque was broken into and vandalized. Islamic Center officials said they have yet decided whether to rebuild at the

site or look for another property in Antioch.

Although police have not found evidence that the arson was a hate crime, they are working with FBI hate crime investigators. No one has been arrested.

The fire, Bonacci said, was an

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MACEY KHOURI/STAFF

HINA CHAUDHRY, left, and Tisha Shalh join marchers in attaching their calls for religious tolerance to a fence outside the Islamic Center of the East Bay, which was burned last month.

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opportunity for the interfaith community and a diverse county "to meet itself."

"We can go to the best of ourselves, to the best of our faith and meet one another with forgiveness, love and respect, and to work for the poor and the needy," Bonucci said.

The event Sunday began with a rally in front of City Hall that featured Muslim, Jewish and Christian prayers and words from state Sen. Tom Jordon; Contra Costa County Supervisor Mark DeSaulnier; Antioch Mayor Donald Journals; Contra Costa Regis Moore; and Police Chief Jim Hyde; Pittsburg Mayor Ben Johnson; and other dignitaries.

After Araga of the interfaith Council's executive committee chanted the Muslim call to prayer, facing northeast toward Mecca, Islam's holiest city. Many of the hundreds of marchers wore hijabs, yarmulkes, clerical garb and other identifying marks of their religions and cultures, as organizations requested.

"It is a wonderful, great feeling for me," said Naseef Ahmed, a board member of the Islamic Center.

In the days after the Aug. 12 arson, "We were very sad and depressed," Ahmed said, "but since we started getting support from the local community, from the (city) council and the police, we started feeling that we are not alone — there are other people who want to share our grief, and they actually did."

The march headed east on

Marchers stopped at the mosque on their way west to an interfaith cultural program at the high school. Many left placards in front of the mosque with messages such as "Salam, Shalom, Peace," "Stop Hate—A Notch Our Town," "Coexist," with a Star of David instead of the "X," and "Diversity is not the Problem."

They listened — many visibly moved and some to tears — as Mohammed Chaudhry, the president of the Islamic Center, lamented that bad often precedes good.

"That is the beauty of God," Chaudhry said. "He puts us through challenges.

"Out of these ashes, look at what flowers have blossomed, flowers of love."

"Our strength is not in hatred; our strength is in unity. We enjoy the same sunshines; we breathe the same air."

"If God didn't discriminate, why should we?"

Turning his attention to the still-unidentified assailant Chaudhry said:

"We pray that he gets better wisdom and that God blesses him with the vision that he can discover the good in us, the good in others."

The Interfaith Council will hold an educational event, "Terrorist or Neighbor? Misconceptions about Islam" at 5 p.m. Oct. 21 at St. Ignatius Catholic Church, 3331 Contra Loma Blvd., Antioch. For more information, go to www.eastcountycouncil.org.

Donations to the Islamic Center's rebuilding fund can be sent to Account No. 10683-04586, Bank of America, 2519 Somersville Road, Antioch CA 94509.

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